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ABSTRACT

Benjamin Bloom's taxonomy of educational objectives (knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation) combined with commonly accepted steps of the creative process (gathering material, reflection, inspiration, first draft or model, and evaluation) can be used to explore some of the possibilities of working with alphabet books in teaching creativity to children. These books vary enormously, falling into four basic patterns: word-picture format, simple narrative, collection of nonsense, or subject-oriented content. They also range from very simple to fairly sophisticated vocabularies. This variety makes such books adaptable to the unique needs of each class or student. As a youngster sees this variety, he or she begins to recognize that a single thing may be defined and redefined in many modes. By using different alphabet books, educators begin to mold children's habits of thought, their flexibility, their fluency, and their receptiveness to solving the puzzles contained in words. This is the beginning of teaching creativity. (TJ)

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Apples, Bloom, and Creativity: The ABC's of Reading Alphabet Books

In the December, 1977, issue of The Horn Book Magazine, I read of the death of H. A. Rey. Although I had never met Mr. Rey, I felt that I had lost a treasured friend. Now, more than ever, I am grateful that he left us so many tales about that incorrigible monkey, George. In Curious George Learns the Alphabet, Rey introduces his ubiquitous character in a direct and simple manner. He says, "This is George. He lived with his friend, the man with the yellow hat. He was a good little monkey, but he was always curious. This morning George was looking at some of his friend's books. They were full of little black marks and dots and lines, and George was curious: what could one do with them?"[1]

In answering George's question, I will try to explore some of the possibilities that can come of working with alphabet books in the context of Benjamin Bloom's taxonomy of educational objectives when those objectives are coupled with defined steps and components of the creative process. Regardless of whether one is learning to read or reading to learn, I consider the art of reading to be one of the highest acts of creativity.

So, let us compare the sequence of terms in Bloom's taxonomy and the progression of steps in the creative process. Later, we will follow this comparison with a discussion of the defined components of creativity, and lastly, apply our find-

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ings to a use of alphabet books with children in kindergarten and the first three grades.

Bloom arranges the terms of his taxonomy in this sequence: knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. In their simplest form -- and I have stayed as close as possible to Bloom's wording -- he defines the terms as follows: knowledge is a recall of specifics, ways and means of dealing with specifics, and an understanding of the universals and abstractions; comprehension includes translation, interpretation, and extrapolation; application seeks to employ previously learned information in a newly structured situation; analysis requires seeing individual elements, relationships, and organizational principles; synthesis is the opposite of analysis, in that it must produce a unified communication, a total plan or a set of operations, or on its highest plane, a set of abstract relationships; evaluation calls for judgments in terms of internal evidence and judgments in terms of external criteria.[2]

Now, before I hear an exclamation of "With five to eight year olds? -- Impossible!" let me ask you to recall Jerome Bruner's philosophy of spiral education, and let me also add that Bloom himself explains that some students may not go beyond the first phase of knowledge, whereas others may be capable of reaching ultimate planes of critical evaluation. To set realistic goals and to monitor student progress, we, as teachers, must understand the full range of possibility. Hence, with Bloom's sequence in mind, we are ready to consider the commonly accepted steps of the creative process. And since we are interested in

their classroom use, Ruth Strang's statement of them in Curriculum Planning for the Gifted serves our purpose. She gives the first step as a gathering of material, for nobody creates from a vacuum. Next, there must be a stage of reflection, asking how the material can be used. Third, there is a stage of inspiration -- that glorious moment of discovery and illumination. Fourth, there come the trials and the labors of the first draft or model, and finally, the pleasure or the pain -- as the case may be -- of evaluation.[3]

In looking back at the sequence in Bloom's taxonomy and the sequence in the steps of the creative process, two important similarities emerge. Both patterns begin with the need to acquire knowledge, and both end with synthesis and evaluation. Between these common points in both systems, there are merely differently named activities of comprehension, application, and analysis. However, to avoid a false sense of security that could result from such a tidy observation, it is well to be mindful of Alex Osborn's admonition in Applied Imagination. He cautions that "Those who have studied and practiced creativity realize that its process is necessarily a stop-and-go, catch-as-catch-can operation -- one which can never be exact enough to rate as scientific. The most that can honestly be said is that it usually includes some or all [of the cited steps]." In this respect, his observation is in agreement with Bloom's statement that the educational objectives are frequently attained only in part.

As a trial application, we can subject the two systems simultaneously to a test run on that old favorite, A Apple Pie.[5] Obviously, the primary necessity is to read on a literal level.

That literal level, according to Bloom, is the acquisition of a knowledge of the facts -- or in the context of the steps in the creative process, a gathering of information on which to base subsequent activities. So, we ask, what word in the book starts with the letter A? Apple. What word starts with B? Bit. And so on. When we move to the next three steps in the taxonomy -- comprehension, application, and analysis -- we must remember that they are incorporated in two steps of the creative process -- those of reflection and illumination. Hence, to be sure that we cover all, we will detail Bloom's three.

Comprehension is first: what word stands for the sound "ă"? Apple. Good. What word is used for the sound "b"? Bit. Fine! Now for application: is apple the only word that you know which begins with the sound "ă"? We know that B bit the apple -- can you give examples of other words that begin with B? Then on to analysis: how many letters are represented in the whole book? Is each letter introduced alone? No? Explain that, please. I see, "X, Y, and Z all had a large slice and went off to bed."

With this understanding of the components of the book, we are ready for a synthesis, and we might begin by asking the name given to such a group of twenty-six letters. Around what single subject are all the letters clustered? Could you make an alphabet book using any other one subject? Good, you want to try our with the names of boys and girls. Did I understand correctly -- you want to start with Ellen? Are you sure that Ellen starts with the same sound as apple? Oh, excuse me; you said you wanted to start with Allen. And so the evaluation must check out each sound.

At this point, let me reemphasize that I am speaking of the teaching of reading as the teaching of creativity. I am aware that this approach may cause concern among those who cling to the notion that creativity cannot be taught. Obviously, I believe that it can. My belief is based on the objectively defined components of creativity, which in themselves, represent an analysis. With an understanding of that analysis, we can synthesize and teach toward the development of each and all of the components of creativity.

The story behind the identification of the components presents a convincing coincidence. Viktor Lowenfeld, in his third edition of Creative and Mental Growth, reported it as follows:

"Dr. J. P. Guilford and his staff at the University of Southern California have been working under a Naval grant on a factor analytical study to find out the criteria of creativity which significantly differentiate between creative and less creative people. This investigation is based on subjects belonging to the exact and applied sciences. In an entirely independent study, Dr. W. Lambert Brittain significantly differentiated between highly creative people in the visual arts and those who were . . . less creative. The significant fact of the two entirely independent studies, with entirely different experimental groups, testing the same phenomena, but for different purposes, is that [the researchers] arrived at almost exactly the same criteria of creativity. A study by Dr. Kenneth Beittel conclusively revealed that the two tests significantly correlate. Thus, it appears that creativity . . . regardless of where it is applied, has common attributes."[6]

The components of creativity ultimately identified by Brittain were (1) reorganization or redefinition, (2) originality, (3) flexibility, (4) fluency, and (5) sensitivity to problems.[7] Any one of the components can be in action at any time; they do not necessarily occur in any particular order. I will return to these attributes for further comment after a brief look at the structure of texts in alphabet books.

Entirely too many textbooks intended for the study of children's literature still maintain that "The pictorial ABC books of each generation are all variants of Mother Goose's 'A Apple Pie.'"[8] That idea is an oversimplified generalization which must be refuted, for the modes of structuring the texts of alphabet books are considerably varied and in some instances quite complex.

The degree of complexity is determined by the purpose of the book. The original purpose of the ABC book seems to have been, and in some instances still is, simply the association of sound with letter -- an unencumbered relationship of one to one. However, many of the newer books deliberately aim for a much broader dimension, and in some cases the alphabet functions merely as a convenient frame upon which to hang not only factual subject matter, but abstract concepts as well. Nevertheless, most ABC books fall into one or some combination of four basic patterns: a word-picture format, a simple narrative, a collection of nonsense, or a subject-oriented content. In keeping with the variety of the textual structures, vocabulary also ranges from the very simple to the undeniably sophisticated. Therein lies the adaptability of these books to the unique needs of each class or student.

The simplest alphabet text conforms to a strict balance of of one word with one picture. Most commonly, the word is a noun. Brian Wildsmith's ABC affords one of the purest examples of the single word, single picture alphabet books.[9] Importantly, his featured objects are kept well within the infant frame of reference. In his book, we find the familiar A for apple, B for butterfly, C for cat, and so forth. Leonard Baskin structures Hosie's Alphabet along the word-picture pattern, but with important additions.[10] In keeping with the child's natural language development, the nouns become somewhat more sophisticated, and, at the same time, are graced with adjectives. Wildsmith's unadorned "Iguana" is presented in Hosie's book as "An incredibly scaly iguana," and his "unicorn" is Baskin's "invisible unicorn." Among the featured-word changes, the familiar lion is supplanted by "The omnivorous swarming locust."

Significantly, the admission of verbals is a preparation for the admission of plot, for plot is always a result of action. In this context Bruno Munari's ABC can be considered an extension on the literary ladder.[11] Although Munari's book is clearly a word-picture type, its content harbors seeds of story in that meandering character, the fly. The introduction of character is indicated from the very beginning when we meet "an ant on an apple," but the real continuity is established by the fly who flits in and out on the pages for F, G, H, I, V, Y, and Z, where he is going "Zzzz."

Unfortunately, there are fewer story alphabets than any other type. The situation is regrettable because often the intrigue

of a good plot can catch even the reluctant reader. But fortunately, the few available stories are good enough to have weathered multiple printings. I refer to such favorites as A Apple Pie,[12] Wanda Gag's ABC Bunny,[13] Roger Duvoisin's A for the Ark,[14] Crockett Johnson's Harold's ABC,[15] and of course, H. A. Rey's Curious George Learns the Alphabet.[16] Among the newer books in this category are Leo Lionni's The Alphabet Tree,[17] Stan Mack's The King's Cat Is Coming![18] and Ida De Lage's line of story alphabets.[19]

Of course, the most popular and possibly the most pleasing of the ABC books are the collections of nonsense -- those fantastic feats of phonetic delight! Peter Piper[20] remains the star, but in the spirit of his precedent, there follow the zany works of Edward Lear,[21] Fritz Eichenberg,[22] Dr. Seuss,[23] Maurice Sendak,[24] and a full circus of more recent clowns. Invariably, the exaggerated alliteration in the text of these books is supported by a cast of characters who engage in the utmost extremes of boisterous slapstick, catering to the young sense of humor which is still based on a physical rather than a verbal appeal. The older nonsense books have usually been constructed around twenty-six independent frames, but some of the recent pieces have connected their seemingly independent scenes by means of a second, simultaneous plane that is effected through the incorporation of a wordless picture book. A good example of the technique is found in Ann Rockwell's Albert B. Cub & Zebra.[25] Albert has lost Zebra, and he traipses through twenty-five discombobulated scenes before he finds his friend in the twenty-sixth.

Although the popularity of the nonsense books has remained perennial, in numbers they are no match for the flood of subject-oriented books. Quite often the primary purpose of these books is not to present the alphabet; rather, their authors use the alphabet as a convenient line upon which to hang their content. That content ranges from an expression of simple, objective information to a sophisticated assembly of facts or themes. The quantity published in this group permits much pedestrian work, but, on the other hand, competition has produced pieces of exceptionally high quality. The situation demands of us a keenly critical approach in selection. The major evil to avoid is the deadly doggerel which, ideally, should never reach impressionable ears.

In the simpler subject books, the city has been a popular topic. Francine Grossbart's A Big City works as a ring composition, beginning and ending with "I love the city."[26] In between are listed her favorite images -- "Antennas, Buildings, Cars . . ." Michael Deasy's City ABC's offers some nice verse about the "alley" and "Bridges [that] "stretch/ Over hushed rivers/ And rushing traffic," or "Cranes [that] Move and lift,/ Hoist and shift."[27] Adam's A B C by Dale Fife is written in well chosen prose: "ADAM and his friends Arthur and Albert live in the same apartment building. Adam's little BROTHER eats breakfast with Adam. Adam looks out the window and sees storm CLOUDS racing toward the city."[28] For those who prefer the country -- Texas style -- there is James Rice's Cowboy Alphabet for grown ups and young'uns too where you can get authentic commentary on armadillos, broncs, cougars and other indigenous critters.[29]

At this point we have completed our structural over-view of alphabet books, Bloom's taxonomy, and some of the more important aspects of creativity. We have, in short, gathered our information, and with bibliography in hand, are ready to ask how it can be used. We explored the taxonomy and the steps of the creative process through a single book. How shall we approach the many books of a single genre? The components of creativity offer us a plan, but because each individual frame of reference controls each output, no two of us will develop the plan in the same way.

But all of us can begin with the process of reorganization or redefinition. We have seen the alphabet book defined in many different ways; yet there exist many other ways waiting to be expressed. If we are flexible enough, we can abandon the ordinary way and come up with some new, some original way to make our definition. Quite possibly our first plan will not work. We are alerted to its weakness through our sensitivity to problems. But fluency is on our side; we produce more plans. We discover that we can define in ways beyond the verbal; we can move from our words to redefine in forms of art, dance, drama, music, or mathematics. Each new definition represents a new experience; each new experience contains seeds of verbal advancement. These are active, creative processes, and they are all related to the process of creative thinking which is the bedrock of creative reading. Of utmost importance is a youngster's opportunity to recognize early that a single thing may be defined and redefined in many modes. The use of various alphabet books, instead of one or two favorites from our own childhood, is one way to begin to mold children's

habits of thought, their flexibility, their fluency, their receptiveness to solving the infinite puzzles contained in what George called "little black marks and dots and lines."

Two obstacles may block our willingness to experiment with creativity. One is the awesome sense of responsibility that frightens us when we realize that some or all of the components of creativity are in action every time a child, depending only upon its meager experience, must make sense of a single letter, a word, a sentence, a paragraph, a book, or a whole group of books. The other obstacle is that most of us are as attached to our statistical analyses as Linus is to his blanket. Obviously, we need to recognize our insecurity before we can over come it. Somehow, we must bring ourselves to the admission that drills and comprehension tests alone can no more produce a creative reader than practicing the scales can produce a musician. Our heavy dependence upon objective testing will have to make room for some subjective evaluation if we expect to see our students move beyond a literal level of reading.

In conclusion, there is one favor I ask of you. On page three of your bibliography, you will note that H. A. Rey's Curious George Learns the Alphabet is not listed. Please insert the title just above James Rice's Cowboy Alphabet. You may be wondering why the Rey book was omitted. Quite truthfully, while the typist was compiling the list from my collection of alphabet books, George -- who now understands dots and marks -- had swiped his book from the stack, and was out on the campus teaching some willing students to read beyond the letters and the lines. I am sure that Charles Darwin would insist that you and I could do the same.

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